

CHICKEN FARM HUNT BY AUTOMOBILE

Back to the Land—Interesting Light Cast on French Country Life and a Monastery Saved From a Hotel Keeper



"AS WE WANDERED THROUGH THE CHARMING GARDEN OF WINDING WALKS."

"WE are in search of a chicken farm and want you to come along and help us find it."

This was the enthusiastic greeting of a pair of friends, a charming and artistic French couple, very Parisian, who motored up to my villa door by the shores of the blue Mediterranean one winter's day just as the Riviera season was in full blossom.

The French Riviera has many uses. As a place which furnishes international amusement for six months in the year it is without a rival, but that it was a region where the principles of the "return to nature" could be practically applied or that it held out possibilities for starting a chicken farm had certainly not occurred to me.

An indulgent and a wealthy parent had permitted monsieur the luxury of being the brightest light in the newest and most eccentric (also entirely unremunerative) school of art, "the Triangulists." He was also enabled to indulge in a fad for collecting automobiles of the latest type. Madame was a Parisian, brought so up to date as to be almost a feminist. They were types of French "moderns," addicted to the prevailing "snobism" of the French, which means that it is the chic thing to wear English clothes and adopt American ideas and drink German beer. Their home life was a swirl apartment in the fashionable Champs Elysees quarter of Paris.

Pinning my friends down to essentials was like playing golf with a ball of quicksilver, but a nebulous plan soon came to take shape. It is the mode now to live in the country; also the true fashion is to have a veritable farm. "And to make tone and tons of money there is nothing like a chicken farm, is it not?" Yes; I admitted that I heard something of the same sort before I left America. "Exactly, we are very American now, and as with you the living is so excited! Fancy, an egg of the day, guaranteed laid within twenty-four hours, sells at retail in Paris for eight sous; just so, eight cents each." I admitted also that this was even going up three better, for not in our wildest efforts had we succeeded in getting the ordinary retail price of New York eggs above five cents, though, to be sure, we were timid about insisting on a guarantee as to age going with them.

So it was that they had decided to live the country life and install a chicken farm in some agreeable spot. I was not a little curious to know what had inspired two such volatile and unlikely exponents of the "back to nature" call, whose only idea of livestock up to the present came from a family of canary birds, a French poodle and such familiarity with horses as came from betting on the Longchamps racetrack. The gentleman farmer is practically unknown in France. It is rather the life of the grand chateau of the large estate or that of a villa complete as a place of residence for a part of the year only. On the other hand, the peasant proprietor, there is nothing in between in France.

That this scheme was being looked on as an amusement and a species of "snobism," to be taken in connection with the ray Riviera season and the lurid splendors of the wicked little principality of Monaco, argued a sud-

den and otherwise inexplicable gushing forth of a hidden spring in French character. Oh, well, some American friends had been theoretically demonstrating the money-making possibilities of the proper cultivation of the egg for the Paris market and "Voilà! behold! Here now appeared upon the scene the angel who had moved the waters of the pool." One does not associate a simple pastoral product like the egg with the gilded luxury of Maxim's, and yet Maxim's, it seemed, was yearning for it in quantity and did not know where to turn for a supply of "œufs de jour" under the twenty-four hour age limit. All of that portion of the gay town of Paris which feeds the multitude that makes it the centre of European "tourism" was in the dark as to where its daily supply of eggs was to come from.

So as an occupation of profit nothing can be better than to establish and cultivate a chicken farm, largely, not in the small way of the peasant with a tiny handful of fowls as a side issue in the corner of the barnyard.

It was easy to see from what source my friends got their large ideas, so foreign to French business methods, which often comprehend nothing more than doing business in their pockets. Now if Maxim's in Paris was experiencing an egg famine why not Ciro's at Monte Carlo, and the glittering white palace hotels all along the Riviera which were increasing each year in number and size? Besides, one might just as well buy a farm in a chic neighborhood where there were distractions close at hand.

What difference would it make to anybody in the little principality of Monaco, where there were no fixed prices, what anybody paid for eggs? Those Russian Grand Dukes who cut the widest swaths through the real palm gardens of the Riviera were quite willing to pay \$2 a portion for their especially imported caviar, and as for the egg that was dropped upon it, they would just as soon pay an additional 20 cents, or \$20, so long as it was the right kind. As for the "millionaires Americans," why they might be counted on for any sort of surcharge if it was only a little more than was being paid by the man in front of them.

If you are going farm hunting in that," said I, indicating the latest pride of my friends in the way of a six cylinder 80 horse-power motor car which bulked like a dreadnought and lapped over everything of its kind which I had ever seen, and was guided by the most chic variety of chauffeur which ever came down the Parisian boulevards, "why, you should know that late values will soar to aeroplane heights with the peasant proprietors."

"What would you have us do?" they asked, regarding me with injured looks. "We ought it especially to attend to this egg business."

"Now, just what is it that you want?" I asked, as we entered the car and adjusted ourselves to seats so sportily inclined that we could see only the tops of the trees and the sky. "A couple of acres will be enough, I suppose," as the machine sprang forward like a hydroplane preparing to rise, finally came back to earth and maneuvered down the street by leaps and bounds. My ideas as to the requirements of fowls were of but the vaguest.

"Mon Dieu, indeed no! It is a grand property that we must have; two thousand hens at least to make it profitable, and they must have vast spaces in which to roam," declared Monsieur.

"Also there must be a field for growing grain; one must grow their food himself, so we have been told, otherwise there will be no profit; and there must be a chateau!"

"For the hens?" I asked. "I thought you were looking for a farm."

"Perfectly, but there is the family—my wife and I, the two infants, the English governess, the German governess, our four servants, my mother-in-law, my own mother and some friends of ours, a man and wife and

attention and were open to taking us on wild chicken chases around the country which resolved themselves simply into joy rides—the opportunity of having a jaunt in the dreadnought tempted them. We flustered many a

manager has to depend upon for the daily egg. We were shown one "model" chicken enterprise where there were as many as a hundred fowls. Was it for sale? Oh, no, but we were taken to it that we might observe the conduct of

the tourist in search of grand hotels and villas allow to remain uncomfortably jammed in between the Maritime Alps and the blue Mediterranean along the hundred miles or more of the Riviera shore. This is the winter flower garden of Europe and is really devoted to an intensive culture of flowers, interspersed with early vegetables and a few vineyards.

There were several nice distinctions here. Land was sold by the square meter if one was looking for a villa site, by the hectare (two and a half acres) if for farming purposes. There seemed, however, a little uncertainty as to the classification of a domain for poultry farming pure and simple.

We ran to earth a flower farm where narcissi and carnations were being grown under the gray-green olive trees and were offered land for five francs the meter, a dollar a square yard, or a trifle more. Even with the flowers thrown in this seemed rather costly as a playground for hens. No, land is not as cheap as might be expected in a country of peasant proprietors, not even at 20 cents a square yard. It might at first seem cheap until one found that it was on a hillside of crushed stone and some scrubby pine-trees. Not much nourishment for hens to be had from that at even a franc a meter.

Even admitting all this my friends might have bought something could anybody have been found to do business with, but we might have been out with warrants, judging from the way the responsible owners melted from sight. There is nothing that the average Frenchman dislikes so much as to be annoyed by business propositions. He throws all responsibility from his birth to his death on his notary.

Notaries are easy enough to find because of the nice little oval plaque posted before the doors of their offices, usually contained in their dwellings. The notary in France usually has the buying, selling and renting of local real estate in his hands. As business agents of the community they are able to keep their fingers on the pulse of the affairs of their own little neighborhood, good and bad, and are encyclopedias of family scandals, debts and property ins and outs. We chased after the notary with small success. One had gone to a funeral, another to a wedding, while another had a family dinner on and could not be disturbed, and a fourth was on a vacation. In the case of these who did happen to be at home we had timed our call at just the two hour gap in the middle of the day when no Frenchman would do business.

"Mon Dieu!" said monsieur, "we will go to Monte Carlo for a change; this trying to find a domicile for hens is very fatiguing; besides we might win enough at the tables to buy the farm."

We didn't; we only contributed our mite to the golden nest eggs of the Cercle des Etrangers, otherwise the gaudy Casino of Monte Carlo, while so far as the neighborhood was concerned any land flat enough thereabouts to keep chickens from falling into the sea was apparently in demand for tennis courts, golf links and polo grounds.

Just beyond Cannes this feather chase began to get warm. We were retracing our wheel tracks in farmless bloom when two blowouts in quick succession threw us on the mercy of a little wayside inn for lunch. An excellent one it was, with a tiny cafe with a sanded floor. Warming up the genial proprietress who cooked our lunch so well over a handful of charcoal in a great hooded fireplace, we unburdened our troubles.

"Voilà!" she exclaimed. "There is the neighboring monastery, a beautiful property, just the place for a chicken farm. I know not, but that one might purchase it."

The combination of a monastery and chickens was dramatic enough to please the French temperament.

Off the main road we turned into the mountain background, through wild gorges and tangled forests. Our dreadnought panted up a winding road around whose twists the ponderous vehicle turned with difficulty. It ended in front of a monumental doorway of an ancient Carthusian monastery which had been deserted by its white-robed fathers some years ago when France set her iron heel upon the Church. Like so much other confiscated property of the Church it had been sold by the French Government to the highest bidder, and the white, silent monks faded away to a more sympathetic land.

Through great hall after great hall and desolate arched cloisters we roamed, through chapel after chapel with monumental tombs and pious pictures. Everything was as the monks had left it. The long row of cells, above each door the inscribed name of the vanished occupant and a pious inscription, workshops where they had labored so diligently, dedicated to the vows of perpetual silence.

There were signs of many trades. In one cell lithographic stones lay on the tables, in another drawing boards and other tools of trade. The cells had been sparsely furnished, each with its blind opening through which food was passed. There were endless empty corridors through which never a word had echoed. Was this silence of centuries to be broken only by the cheerful cackle of hens?

The aesthetic souls of the farm seekers were delighted; could any environment be more comely if faut for a grand chateau!

Truly the French are an adaptable race. Naturally a people whose ancestors had planned a revolution would not hesitate through sentiment to turning a monastery into a chicken farm.

"So chic, so unusual. With nothing of the ennui and banality of the regular country—life existence," declared my friends, and light heartedly they began to apportion off this truly royal domain, once the home of 200 monks, whose foundation was laid by a king and added to by princes.

There were courtyards enough for many thousands of fowls; there were gardens, and vineyards, one cultivated by the frugal fathers, large enough to provide an inexhaustible supply of poultry feed. There were wine presses, dairies, bakehouses, washhouses, a veritable little village complete.

"Just the playground for the children," exclaimed Madame, all smiles as we wandered through the charming little garden of winding walks, now grass grown, of tinkling, crumbling fountains and tall cypresses, where grouped about a marble cross in unmarked graves lay in eternal silence those whom no edict of banishment could affect.

It took fully two weeks to get a line on the property and still longer to find the proprietors who had kept a fine property like this idle for six years! We scoured the countryside, the cafes, and at last trapped him in the garden of his flower farm with a little basket of the seventeenth century shepherdess kind over his arm, cutting roses in brown corduroy suit and leather gaiters, affable and gracious and much embarrassed. Alas for the Paris mondains' dream of an unusual chateau and a gold mine of eggs! The Swiss manager of a battery of Riviera hotels had just made the owner offer to turn the monastery into a hotel for winter visitors.

The artistic sensibilities of my friends were shocked. Their sporting blood was aroused. The value of a hotel vs. fresh eggs for tourists was vehemently disputed. Substantial arguments were shifted into the discussion and every raise in price was promptly met by Monsieur until eventually the monastery as an aristocratic setting for an experiment in egg farming was knocked down to the enthusiastic amateurs. The bargain was sealed according to the French traditional methods, over a bottle of delectable wine from the owner's own vineyard.

"So convenient to the golf links at Cannes, and I adore les sports," beamed Madame.

Thus was the great, towered monastery, perched on its lofty mountain eyrie, preserved from a desecration far worse than the cheerful matutinal songs of busy hens engaged in useful duty. One felt sure that the vanished, ghostly fathers would much rather that chickens should cluck cheerfully above their ashes than that the rattle of tourists' teacups and the chatter at the bridge tables should dispel the cloistered stillness of their venerated courtyards.

"It's a costly affair, this installing a chicken farm," said Monsieur reflectively as we made our adieux preparatory to his returning for the fete of his grand-mere.

"Yes," I said interestedly. "Mais, oui; thirty thousand francs I paid for the automobile, eight thousand for our trip and contingent expenses during the search, and I dropped two thousand francs at that Casino at Monte Carlo, besides eighty thousand for the monastery, and still not a fowl in sight."

Twenty-four thousand dollars against the problematic output of hens in the hands of amateurs!

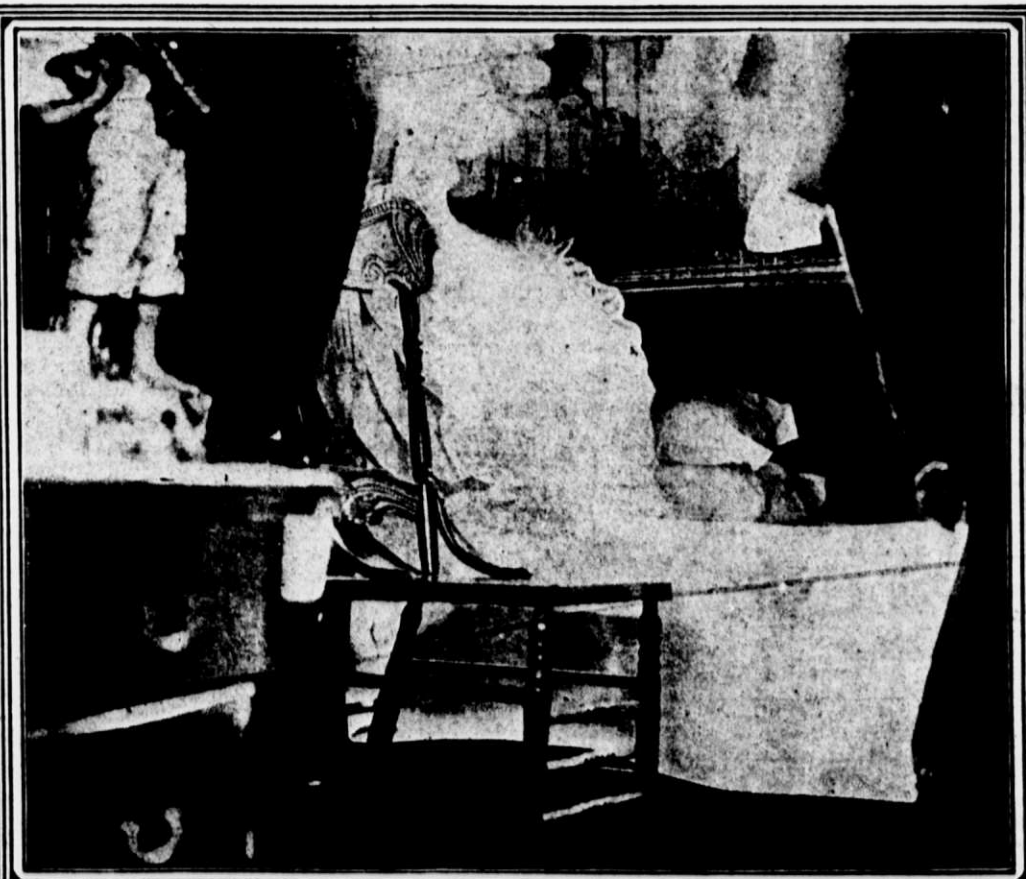
"But this is the way you do it in America, doubtless?" Monsieur volunteered inquiringly.

"Well, not exactly," I murmured. "But this is one of the exceptions that proves the rule that the French are the most economical of peoples, as we all know."

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